

Welcome to Yoknapatawpha County

By Mark Hayes

Driving from county to county in Mississippi — through Jackson, George, Greene, and Perry counties — I noticed the signs that announced my passage into new territory: ENTER FORREST COUNTY. The county signs have a proprietary, sober, cautionary tone: *You may enter this county, but be on your best behavior.* These signs provide a contrast to Mississippi's official slogan, emblazoned on all the tourist literature: The South's Warmest Welcome. Which was true? I wondered as I drove along.

Until this summer, I couldn't say I'd ever spent much time in Yoknapatawpha County, the fictional setting for much of William

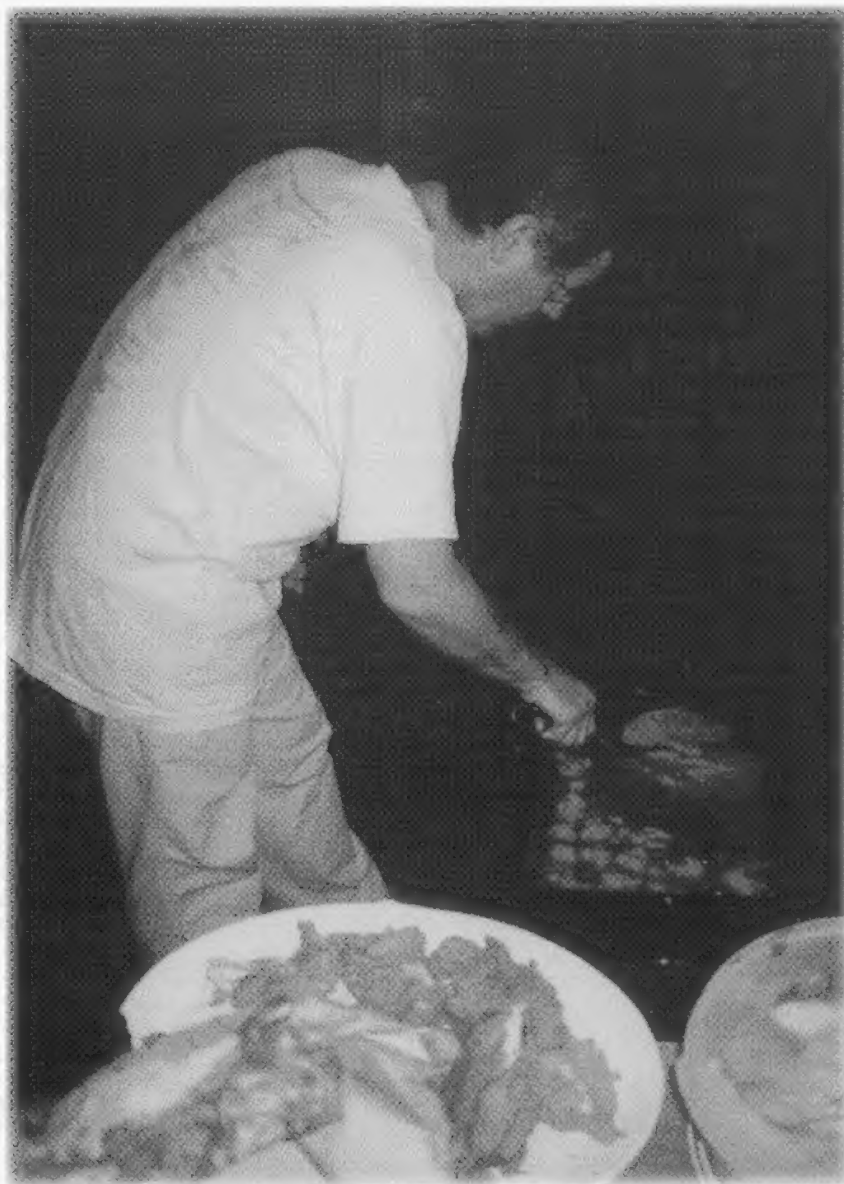
Faulkner's work. I admit the region's name has always been a challenge for me to wrap my tongue around. I had read *The Sound and the Fury* in college and several of Faulkner's short stories here and there, but the difficult-looking name of that county always made me think twice about picking up *Sanctuary* or *Absalom, Absalom!* on my own. Somehow I never felt I was ready for these works, that I should save them for later in my life.

Where I grew up in Maine, the Abnaki place-names gave the summer tourists trouble: Mooselookmeguntic or Pemadumcook or Cobbosseecontee. But to me, a native, the names appeared merely long, not exotic or

intimidating at all. No doubt the summer tourists found me and many other natives to be much like the Native American place-names: difficult, confounding, even hostile to communication. I had to go to college in Massachusetts and return to Maine to work as a teacher and journalist to understand how the tourists felt. After being away for a while, I was often treated like an outsider. But books by writers like E. Annie Proulx, Cathie Pelletier, Russell Banks, and Carolyn Chute helped me understand the place where I was born and helped me remember how to speak a language I'd forgotten, or maybe I had tried to forget. I had started to understand the connections between a region,

Rowan Oak, Faulkner's haven in his hometown of Oxford, Mississippi





Noel Polk fries up a batch of catfish in the backyard of his home in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

its literature, and its people. As for Faulkner, Carolyn Chute, author of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* and the more substantial *Merry Men*, still summed it up for me: "He uses a lot of big words, and his sentences go from here back to the airport."

Almost three years ago, I moved to a rural area in central Florida, a region that seemed more like what I'd heard about "the South" than what I'd heard about Florida. Many place names were weird: Withlacoochee, Thonotosassa, Weohyakapa. The people in this region were

for the most part wary and terse with a college-educated Yankee. Within a year I had gratefully moved to more cosmopolitan Tampa Bay to work at Berkeley and enroll in graduate classes at USF. The few Florida writers I did read — Leonard "Totch" Brown and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and even Carl Hiaason — helped me better understand Florida, but this taste of the South I had in the rural center of the state still puzzled me. As foreign as it seemed at times, something about Central Florida reminded me of home. Having made the connection between

my home in Northern New England and "the South" through this geographical syllogism, I seemed ready to read William Faulkner. The National Endowment for the Humanities had just what I needed.

The Heart of the Seminar

Professor Noel Polk speaks softly and has a kind face, but he is one of the most vigorous and determined scholars I have ever met. If you purchase a new copy of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Hamlet*, *Light in August*, or *As I Lay Dying* (to name a few titles), you will probably find Professor Polk's name at the front of the book in the "Publisher's Note," explaining how this version of the text has been corrected under his supervision.

How does Professor Polk correct a text? For a given text he gathers all manuscripts Faulkner wrote by hand or typed, all versions of the typeset (or galley) proofs the publisher sent to Faulkner with the Faulkner's scribbles in the margins, all correspondence related to the publication of the book, and all published editions of the book. Then, with all this material before him, he tries to figure out how Faulkner originally wanted the book to *really read* before typists and proofreaders and editors and publishers started normalizing the words, sentences, paragraphs. This process of correction takes many hours of work a week for several years. Professor Polk once said he had read *The Sound and the Fury* about 400 times.

In addition to this editorial work, Professor Polk teaches at the University of Southern Mississippi, *alma mater* of singer Jimmy Buffett and slinger Bret Favre. Polk writes articles and books, the latest of which is the excellent *Outside the Southern Myth*. Polk has an active hand in shaping the annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference in Oxford, Mississippi. And — this is where I come in — Polk takes six weeks each summer to teach a seminar on William Faulkner for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Professor Polk knows and loves Faulkner's work as well as anyone can, I think. Polk is the very heart and breath of the seminar I attended, and, despite the fact that he has many, many other things to do, I knew for six weeks that I and my fellow seminarians were the focus of his attention and experience and generosity.

The Life of a Student

Most days around 7 a.m. I rose in my dormitory room on the third floor, cleaned up in a hallway bathroom, then packed my Faulkner

and notebooks and pens into my bag and walked over to the cafeteria with some of my classmates. After eggs and toast and coffee (I did not eat any grits), we all walked over to the seminar room. All the walking I did helped me maintain a relaxed, focused attitude all day — I was focused and unhurried. After all the Chickasaw word *yoknapatawpha* means “water flowing slow through the flatland” — an excellent metaphor for the tone of my summer. All my immediate needs were taken care of, and I had only to do my homework and go to class. I felt very free.

The seminar itself demanded my full attention and participation. For instance, in the first four days of the seminar, we read the first and most difficult section of *The Sound and the Fury* sentence by sentence, pausing often to make sure we understood fully how each new detail fit with the previous accumulation of details. Keeping our discussion so close to the text and reading with someone who knew the text so intimately helped me learn more about reading as a process that takes time and demands patience and intelligence of the reader. After four or five hours of this, Professor Polk let us go for the day. I usually walked back to the cafeteria with my brains feeling much like the ambiguous casseroles I saw on display in the serving line.

After my customary lunch of a turkey sandwich and lemonade, I headed over to the library to read or write for a couple of hours. By mid-afternoon, I was incapable of any more academic work, so I would go to the gym and get a little exercise, then return to my dorm room for a shower and a nap. When I woke up, the searing Mississippi day would be ending, and back I would go to the cafe for another turkey sandwich. Evenings I spent at the library or working in my room. Eventually, we'd all get sick of studying and turn on a baseball game in the third floor lounge or head out for a late night snack — hardly ever a turkey sandwich.

When I could, I ate things I had not eaten before. Thursday evenings Noel Polk usually invited us over to his house in a quiet Hattiesburg neighborhood for good food and conversation. My favorite meal at Professor Polk's was the catfish fry, and I must have eaten three platefuls of catfish with hot sauce, hush-puppies, and coleslaw. In addition to Professor Polk's catfish (and his mother's gumbo), I sampled a beef-and-pork plate and sweet tea at Leatha's Bar-B-Que Inn in Foxworth, Mississippi. Hanging on the wall at Miz Leatha's are several newspaper clippings claiming her barbecue to be the best in the world; a framed photo of Johnnie Cochran of the O.J. Simpson trial seemed to affirm Leatha's

status. In Vidalia, Louisiana — just across the Mississippi River from Natchez — I ate cat-in-a-bag: catfish with rice baked in an actual brown paper bag. You don't eat the bag, or at least I didn't. All this food was a welcome break from the usual cafeteria fare.

On the Road

None of us spent all our time exclusively in Hattiesburg. In groups or as individuals, we visited the towns and cities in Mississippi and

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- Eudora Welty

in the South. I did not travel as far afield as some of my classmates — who visited Memphis, New Orleans, Montgomery, Clarksdale, Mobile — but I tried to see as much of Mississippi as I could.

Professor Polk took the entire class to Natchez one Friday, first to see several of that city's antebellum homes. In Natchez and in other places I saw plenty of antebellum buildings, though I don't know enough about such things to comment on them. At any rate, that same Friday we also went to Rodney, described by Noel Polk as a ghost town, somewhere

north of Natchez at the end of a long winding hilly road bordered by a kudzu-coated landscape that makes everything look like giant Bonsai sculptures. Rodney — or, as it was known, Rodney's Landing — was once a thriving river town known for producing fine cotton. The place fell victim to the war, to fire, to yellow fever epidemics, and finally to the changeable Mississippi itself, which shifted two miles to the west in the years after the war, leaving the town high and dry.

The matriarch of Mississippi writers, Eudora Welty, visits Rodney in an essay entitled “Some Notes on River Country.” She describes it far better than I can: “Today Rodney's Landing wears the cloak of vegetation which has caught up this whole land for the third time, or the fourth, or the hundredth. There is something Gothic about the vines, in their structure in the trees—there are arches, flying buttresses, towers of vines, with trumpet flowers swinging in them for bells and staining their walls. And there is something of a warmer grandeur in their very abundance — stairways and terraces and whole hanging gardens of green and flowering vines, with a Babylonian babble of hundreds of creature voices that make up the silence of Rodney's Landing.”

I also spent a day on my own in Vicksburg at the National Military Park, wandering through the steep-sloped battlefields and wondering how anyone ever managed to fight (let alone win) a battle in the difficult terrain. Vicksburg is a city which, after the Civil War, did not celebrate the Fourth of July until 1976. The city's lasting bitterness about the war was due in large part to Union General Ulysses S. Grant's campaign for Vicksburg, a battle which concluded with a 47-day siege of the city, during which many civilians resorted to living in caves for safety. Mark Twain, writing over two decades after the end of the war in *Life on the Mississippi*, wrote: “Signs and scars still remain, as reminders of Vicksburg's tremendous war-experiences; earthworks, trees crippled by cannon balls, cave refuges in the clay precipices.... The caves did good service during the six weeks' bombardment of the city... [used] mainly by the women and children; not to live in constantly, but to fly to for safety on occasion.”

Much of the city's history is preserved in one of the better local museums in the state, in the old Warren County Courthouse, located in the center of town.

In Jackson, Mississippi's sprawling state capital, I watched a Texas League baseball game between the Jackson Generals and the Shreveport Captains, Double A affiliates of the Houston Astros and the San Francisco Giants,

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respectively. Always a stoic Red Sox fan, I was curious to see that the Generals were coached by former Red Sox catcher, Gary Allenson. This explains why the Generals lost. The Generals gave up seven runs in the top of 12th inning, an inning in which the pitcher made the exact same throwing error twice on consecutive suicide squeeze plays by the Captains. But I still bought a Generals hat for my collection and saw fireworks after the game.

Green and Buff

Charles Walker is in the Guinness Book of World Records because he played 306 games of checkers simultaneously — winning 300, drawing 5 and losing only one match. He did this in 1994 to set a new record and put him back in the books as the champion checkers player, a title he had somehow lost. (As Casey Stengel once said, "You could look it up.") Apparently, Charles Walker had a checkers tradition to defend; after all, he had built the International Checkers Hall of Fame in Petal, Mississippi, because he needed a place to put all of his checkers stuff. I had read in the tourist literature that this place had the world's largest (and second largest) checker board.

Clearly, I had to visit.

These days, the International Checkers Hall of Fame (AKA Chateau Walker, according to the arch over its front gate) is open by

appointment only. Our tour guide, Herschel Smith, met us out front and let us in through the side door one afternoon. For some reason, the Hall of Fame has gotten rather run-down and now has a faint mildewy smell. There was

(there were rows of tables and chairs), but might also have been a meeting hall for a church (there was an altar and large crucifix at the front of the room). Mr. Smith, beginning his tour-talk, motioned to one corner of the

room, where, in a glass case, sat a replica of a faintly Middle-Eastern looking "checkers robot" — the Great Kag, I think — that had made appearances in carnival attractions in 19th century America. After 15 minutes of describing the Great Kag, Mr. Smith told us we were in fact in the same room with the world's largest checkerboard. Unfortunately, the tables and chairs of the church group had covered the board's green-and-white tiles. To our surprise, we'd been standing on the world's largest checkerboard and not even known it! And, Mr. Smith added, the church group also suspected the Great Kag was satanic, so they draped a cloth over it during their services. We moved on.

At this point, Mr. Smith let on that he wasn't too happy about this tour gig — that, in fact, Walker had pretty much given up on the Hall of Fame and had moved on to other things. In fact, according to Smith,

Walker's world record

neither air conditioning to cool us nor lights to illuminate our steps on our tour.

Mr. Smith first led us into a large room that appeared to be some sort of cafeteria

was no great feat, since Walker played primarily school-children and amateur "wood-pushers" in his 306-versus-one match. The Hall of Fame, Mr. Smith said, was now largely



A view of the world's second-largest checkerboard at the International Checkers Hall of Fame in Petal, Mississippi.

unused, save for main hall, which wasn't used for checkers at all. We had, of course, figured that out. Herschel Smith went on to relate how he had moved to Mississippi from Durham, North Carolina, six years before after becoming an avid checkers player in his retirement. Mr. Smith had come to work a sort of second career with checkers great Charles Walker. But it turns out Walker soon moved on to other non-checkers-related things, leaving Mr. Smith to tend to the Hall of Fame as best he could. Mr. Smith seemed very matter-of-fact about all these disappointing details. We heard all this as we walked down the long Hall of Flags, lined with the flags of 171 nations, "All the countries in which checkers is played," Mr. Smith said.

The museum proper — and it is a

proper museum — fills a large two-story room and houses framed photos of famous checkers matches, checkers-themed oil painting (Egyptians playing, Eskimos playing, John Smith and Pocahontas playing), a full library of checkers books, unusual checkers sets, swords, even a full suit of armor. The world's second largest checkerboard lays in green-and-white tile on the floor — as the floor, to be precise. Mr. Smith anticipated the question as to why almost all the checkerboards in the place were green-and-white. Actually, he stressed, the colors were green-and-buff. Apparently, the checkers authorities felt that the red-and-black scheme we're all familiar with is very hard on the eyes, so, after much research and testing,

the soothing green-and-buff pattern was made official. All tournament matches, Mr. Smith said, are waged on the green-and-buff. He added, "If you had to stare at a red-and-black board for eight hours a day, you'd go out of your mind."

Pilgrimage

In the sixth and final week of the seminar we moved out of the dormitory at Southern Miss and drove the 200 miles north

Faulkner scholars, experts, and students — all assembled for six days of lectures, readings, exhibitions and panel discussions. And socializing, too, since one of the conference's sponsors was — no kidding — Jack Daniels. Fresh from our seminar with Professor Polk, we seminarians were a confident and fine-tuned bunch of Faulknerians.

After you've digested enough William Faulkner, there's very little you can do to prepare to see the square in the center of Oxford with its impressive Lafayette County Courthouse. On the south side of the courthouse stands the Civil War monument, its

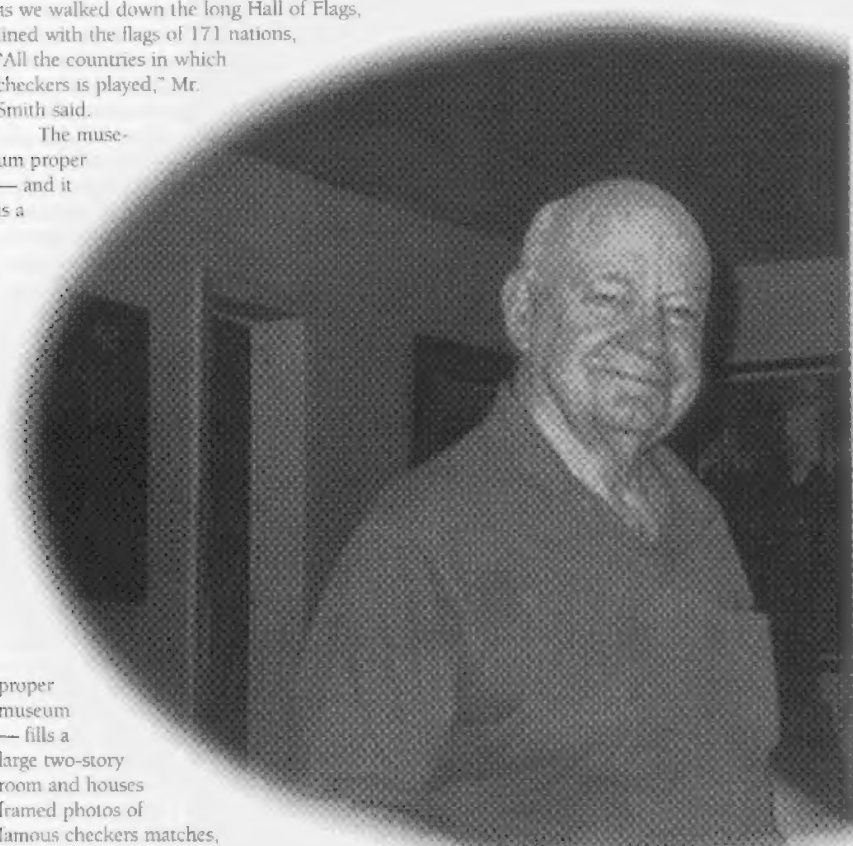
Confederate soldier looking out over the traffic on South Lamar

Street. Here before you is the square from the final pages of *The Sound and the Fury* and

the monument which must be on the proper side of the carriage or Benjy

Compson will set to bellowing. Seeing the square for the first time is like stepping into the book, but only for a moment. The effect fades, of course, but that eerie convergence of the actual and the apocryphal shocked me like few things I have ever experienced.

Even better than Oxford's square is the Faulkners' homestead — Rowan Oak. Now a historic landmark owned by the university, Rowan Oak was a dump when Faulkner bought it in 1930. He worked on the property when he had time and money and eventually brought it to its still-preserved state of simplicity and grace. A visit to Rowan Oak costs



Herschel Smith, of the International Checkers Hall of Fame.

to Oxford — Faulkner's hometown — and into another, taller, dormitory at the University of Mississippi, an institution known colloquially as "Ole Miss." Each year, Oxford and its University host the Yoknapatawpha and William Faulkner Conference; the summer of 1997 was the conference's 24th and also marked the centennial of the year of Brother Will's birth. This year's gathering would be the largest ever of

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nothing, and its spacious, quiet grounds of cedar, magnolia, and wisteria provided me with several afternoons' worth of reading on a bench around the back of the house. Rowan Oak serves the purpose for which Faulkner built it: a refuge from the outside world. Inside the house, on the first floor, you can stand in the doorway of the room where Faulkner worked. I saw a writer's space: a small table with a typewriter, a few books on a bookshelf, a twin bed with a bare bulb clamped to the cast-iron bedframe. A clean, simple place. On two walls Faulkner painted a storyboard-outline for his 1954 novel, *A Fable*. Apparently, even he couldn't keep the plot of this difficult book clear in his head, so he painted what he needed onto the wall.

In the first few days of the conference the Mississippi heat and humidity — the worst I have ever felt — bore down on Oxford terribly. There was little relief, even when the sun had gone to rest. We spent much of our days in air-conditioned auditoriums, listening to very fine lectures and discussions involving many of the heavyweights in Faulkner studies — Millgate, Blotner, Bleikasten, Irwin. We seminars puffed up when Professor Polk's name was mentioned; this was the same guy who cooked catfish for us. On one very hot day, in the middle of a lecture by a French critic of very fine intellectual pedigree who was berating American scholars for their sloppy thinking, the electricity in the auditorium went out: no lights. The PA went silent. The French critic was cut off in mid-haranguer. A room full of English teachers couldn't help but comment on the irony of the circumstances. Three hundred of us sat in the warming dark, waiting for the lights to come on, which they did not. Eventually, we went out into the dazzling sun and trudged back to the dormitory.

By the end of the week, though, I think I was growing tired and a bit irritated at all the rigorous theoretical manipulation Faulkner's books were receiving from scholar after scholar. The approach of these critics seemed too esoteric, too strained, verging on self-parody at times. Professors argued from sophisticated, controversial, even obscure ideological positions on race, class, gender, and sexuality. I wanted to say to them like my students sometimes say to me: "You've got too much time on your hands." But I suppose all those issues are in the books; Faulkner's work possesses a complexity that means many things to many people. As a graduate student, I admit I too have to read in this arch, almost forced manner, too — if only to write papers for my classes. Nevertheless, after a week in Oxford, I found myself wanting to return to Professor Polk's seminar in Hattiesburg, back to those hours of

close, close reading and the simple discussion of what the books meant to us. I have always liked to read, and Faulkner's books reward the reader. Let's leave it at that and not liquefy his works in an ideological blender. Professor James Carrothers of the University of Kansas summed up my feelings in a remark he made during the final session at Oxford: "I just hope we haven't done too much damage."

On the last night of the conference, around midnight, everyone in the seminar met on the north side of the big hill in St. Peter's Cemetery in Oxford, at the spot where Faulkner's grave lies. We stood for a long time

in the dark and sipped whiskey and talked about the summer. For six weeks we had been students and teachers, we had become friends, we had thrown ourselves open to the full force of one person's art and been changed by it. For six weeks we had brought out the best in each other. I thought about my own mortality and about what work I hoped to leave behind for others to remember. I thought about Maine, about Florida, about Mississippi. When we had finished talking and thinking we poured whiskey onto the writer's grave, stayed just long enough to feel awkward, then turned to our cars to begin our journeys home. ☛

The author stands in front of the Masonic Lodge in the "ghost-town" of Rodney, Mississippi.

